

Building Fluency: A Course for Non-native Speakers of English

By Moh-Kim Tam

Oral communication courses consist of several important components with particular areas of focus. One important area is pronunciation, not just as an isolated drill-and-exercises component, but as part of a more interactive approach. A second area of focus is the teaching of suprasegmentals and how they are used in individual sounds. A third type of oral communication program may include a combination of the above-mentioned approaches with the addition of drills such as voice quality, and voice setting. The big challenge, however, lies in the task of providing meaningful and productive speaking experiences where learners can observe and adjust their speech patterns without modifying the essential meaning of their speech.

What learners need from an oral communication course is sufficient practice. Morley (1991) suggests three modes of practice: imitation, rehearsal, and extemporaneous speech. Like playing the piano, imitating requires the concentration of the controlled production of speech features based on hearing audio- and/or video- taped materials or even based on speech-analysis systems using computer programs. Rehearsed practice aims to achieve a form of stabilized yet modified speech patterns so that the learner can have easy access to the pattern when it is needed. In classrooms short oral presentations, such as skits, are useful activities for rehearsed practice, defined here as repetition of the same material or content until speech is fluent. Extemporaneous speech practice, which is more appropriate for advanced learners, integrates modified speech patterns into natural and creative speech. A beginner can steadily progress along a continuum from imitative speech to rehearsed speech and then finally to extemporaneous speech practice.

The aim of this article is to describe a speech course conducted recently with a group of graduate students who have minimal experience with spoken English. They are engineering graduates from the People's Republic of China studying for postgraduate degrees at universities in Singapore. Some are research scholars; others are research students. While they are highly competent in their field of study, many display low oral English proficiency. Since some of these scholars are required to use English to supervise undergraduates in their laboratory tests and experiments, there is a growing concern over their oral production skills. Studies have shown that listeners' comprehension is adversely affected by poor oral production characterized by faulty pronunciation, grammar and discourse patterns (Gumperz 1982, and Green 1989).

Researchers are now using "pragmatic means" rather than "linguistic means" to overcome this problem. Programs or courses may improve communication by teaching strategies in oral presentation, fielding questions, and understanding non-verbal communication. In addition, the syllabus may aim to promote understanding of the host countries' cultures and practices (Smith et al, 1992). Learners can also be taught to understand suprasegmentals by using field-specific materials (Anderson-Hsieh 1990), and to improve oral skills by using field-specific written text (Myers 1995).

In this study, repetition is the main mode of oral practice because it has been shown that repetition has a positive effect on building fluency (Nation 1989). For example, the rate of speaking increases, the number of hesitations falls, and hesitation markers such as *ah* and *um* are substantially reduced as is the number of repeats and false starts (Hieke 1981). The increase of information in the subjects' subsequent talk shows that prior experience in speaking at least once enabled students to become more efficient speakers (Brown et al, 1984). Traditionally, training using repetition of utterances was frequently associated with pattern drills. This was usually boring and even meaningless. In 1983, Maurice developed the 4/3/2 technique, whereby a learner has three opportunities to speak on the same content to his audience albeit with a shorter and shorter time allowance. Initially the learner is given four minutes for the first talk, then three minutes, and finally, two minutes. It was shown that students' speaking rate increased, while their hesitations decreased with each repeated talk. In addition, various types of grammatical errors were eliminated, and sentence structures improved with each repetition (Nation 1989). Repetition as a form of oral practice has the inherent benefit in that the learner becomes more efficient as s/he focuses specifically on more important points and eliminates redundant words and phrases in her/his speech. Secondly, repetition creates an effect of rehearsal. That is, the student overcomes the tendency to rephrase, pause and search, to correct sentence structures and the misuse of words and phrases (before the final performance.)

Attention is also paid to the proper use of discourse markers, prosodic cues, systematic listing or itemization, and other cohesive links. Suprasegmental elements can be incorporated along with fluency practice. For example, learners seeking training in public speaking should be aware of their voice control, stress, and pitch. To be communicative is to be able to use voice quality to its fullest to enhance the meaning of the message. Simply put, fluency does not stand alone.

Building Up Fluency

For sixteen postgraduate students from the People's Republic of China, the course consisted of six three- hour sessions; in each session, three components of activities were engaged in: fluency practice, reading aloud, and dialogue or role-play. A description of each component is given below.

1. Fluency practice. The main emphasis of this course was to prepare teaching assistants (TAs) to give a technical talk to undergraduate students to enable them to conduct their own experiments. Our course purpose was to prepare the TAs a week in advance to produce a coherent explanation of the concept and tasks that listeners could understand. Since these TAs taught different topics each week, they selected their own topics. Students were put into groups of four; one speaker delivered his talk to three listeners for four minutes. At the end of the talk, the listeners provided immediate feedback to the speaker on his/her pronunciation, organization, voice quality, and, in some cases provided, alternative approaches to explaining certain concepts. In fact, there were occasions when the listeners would tell the students giving the talk that they could not understand them. Armed with this feedback of suggestions and comments, students would get back to their seats and mentally rework their speeches. Another member of the group, likewise, would give his/her four-minute talk, and then be given immediate feedback. This went

on until all participants in the group had completed their four-minute talks. Then the second round, a three- minute round, commenced. Once again, each participant took his/her turn to speak followed by feedback. Finally, the two-minute round was conducted. Throughout the session, the instructor moved around to listen and provide advice on different matters. Very frequently, common mistakes, for example, the mispronunciation of technical words, the misuse of sentence structure or even the absence of eye contact, were discussed with the whole class.

2. Oral reading. The general purpose of this section is not to develop reading skills per se but to allow learners to build a specific skill. For example, students practiced articulating difficult words and generating greater awareness of how words are pronounced given the sound/spelling correspondence. They also practiced placing stress in the right place, producing correct rhythm in sentences, and speaking in meaningful thought-groups. In general, oral reading helps everyone to become more focused on voice quality and pronunciation. Participants were grouped into threes with one student reading aloud to the other two, who had no access to the text. The pair audience gave feedback on their comprehension of the message and on mispronunciation of words. During each Oral Reading session, the following aspects were emphasized:

- a. *Getting the rhythm right:* The teacher read to the class a text marked with stressed words; learners listened and marked those stressed words on their copy. They had to go through this once again with a partner.
- b. *Marking the thought-group:* The class was given a copy of the text. As the teacher read, the class would mark slashes each time the teacher paused. Then they read the paragraph to their partners indicating where the slashes were placed.
- c. *Speeding up:* The teacher read several paragraphs as quickly as she could to the class. Each paragraph read was individually timed and written on the blackboard. Using pair work, students would read to each other. When the first reader had finished, the second would quickly raise his/her hand to acknowledge completion.
- d. *Stressing:* Learners were required to bring to class different words and phrases with which they have problems. These were reviewed either with a good pronunciation dictionary or practiced in minimal pairs with other words.

3.(a) Dialogue practice. Reduced forms: The speech of fluent speakers is often replete with reduced forms such as contraction, elision, assimilation, and reduction. These forms lead to the disappearance of word boundaries, to the omission of end vowels and consonants, and to substitutions of elements within words. Sentences also appear in elliptical forms, and when the context is obvious, subjects, articles, verbs, pronouns, etc., are frequently deleted. It has been observed that "students whose education has been largely couched in slow and deliberate spoken English are often shocked to find, when they enter a context in which native speakers are talking to each other, that they have considerable difficulty in understanding what is being said" (Brown 1990:6). Thus, this course included a half-hour session during each lesson on understanding reduced forms. Weinstein's (1982) book was used to teach learners reduced forms. First, students listened to the tape which gave the slow pronounced version and then the relaxed, fast pronunciation. Students repeated the slow version followed by the faster version. The tape was then switched off and pairs or trios practiced "conversing" using the full text.

Rhythm and stress. Together with understanding and using the reduced forms, students practiced rhythm and stress (which are directly related to reduced forms in spoken English) (see Footnote 1 below). To understand the difference between stressed and unstressed sounds, learners were required to decode these differences in each utterance. At the same time, they were required to stress the right words so that the meaning of the message could be transmitted fairly accurately. This component provided practice in interpreting meanings in both stressed, mildly stressed, and unstressed forms. In this way, students learned how to avoid stressing every syllable.

3.(b) Role-play. In fluency practice, learners delivered prepared talks. Role play was introduced only in the latter part of the course when students became more confident and self-assured. Role play is interactive and consists of a dialogue among several persons. In addition, it involves an interpretation of gestures, movement, gaze, facial and body expressions. Appropriate register is required, and the degree of formality is signaled by the use of colloquial expressions, address, humour, and/or other local discourse markers.

Feedback and Discussion

At the end of each session, participants completed a self-evaluation and feedback form. This particular self-evaluation was of great importance to the students as they had to reflect on their delivery based on the feedback of their listeners. It was a process of awareness or consciousness-raising (Rutherford 1987).

The self-evaluation form was divided into four sections: a). fluency development (questions included what they had learned from feedback given by their listeners, and what they had observed about the way others spoke). b). dialogue/role-play (questions included a description of their reactions towards playing certain roles) c). reading aloud (questions focussed on stress and rhythm), d). a section on suggestions for future sessions and for further improvement. The questions in the form were changed slightly for each session to prevent students from providing the same answers they had given earlier.

The original 4/3/2 technique allows learners "to perform at a level above their usual level of performance" (Arevart & Nation 1991: 91). However, adjustments were required. In the first session, when the original technique was used without any adjustment, each speaker had only one listener, and s/he spoke to her/his one listener three times consecutively. The net effect was that listeners started to feel bored and impatient. Since students did not wish to be "stuck" with just one listener for the whole session, modifications to this approach were made. Instead of speaking on a one-to-one basis, a speaker addressed at least three listeners in a group. Each student had a turn in each round. This adjustment led to increased motivation, attention, and interest in the various talks.

Student evaluations show that this approach to fluency training achieved some of the following results:

a. Pronunciation: Most participants felt that this was an area which showed greatest improvement as testified by the following sample responses (errors unedited):

Most pronunciation problem has been corrected. Perhaps this refers specifically to the lesson he has in mind.

I've learnt how to change the way I spoke with different words, such as "what I mean," "you know," "in other words."

I am able to particularly resolve at least two problems regarding my own fluency. The first is to stress the important words when I speak. The second is the preparation of a presentation. I have improved my pronunciation, tone and transition of the sentence. I have improve some pronunciation and tone problem.

b. Voice quality: Students also claimed that they were more aware of the importance of appropriate voice quality. Voice projection, initially a big problem, was to some extent overcome by the participants as their confidence increased. Stress and intonation became less problematic although much more practice was required. Unfortunately, the course did not last long enough for significant change.

c. Confidence: Many participants felt that they became less inhibited using English in front of their class. By the third delivery of their talk, hesitations and faltering speech were greatly reduced. The "well-formedness" phenomena, (Crystal 1987 and Temple (1985) which occurred in training allowed these learners to have an immediate mental access to words and phrases.

d. Kinetic behaviour: By the end of the course eye contact was successfully maintained by all participants. Originally, many participants (especially the women) were unable to look at the audience.

e. Peer feedback: Learners benefited from feedback given by their classmates. Here is one remark written in the self- evaluation form:

"I've try to incorporate my listeners' recommendations into my talk. From them, I learn how to express my idea, to be confident, in my speaking style, appearance including eye contact, body posture, focusing."

Conclusion

The pedagogic implication of this course is that fluency training is possible. In this part of the world, where most people use English as a second or a foreign language, fluency in English is still very much a problem. By encouraging repetition of utterances, focusing on voice quality, and reduced forms in speech, improvements can be assured. While repetition of utterances has traditionally tended to be boring and meaningless, repetition to a small audience on field-specific material may be the best recourse as the topic has added meaning and focus. Given the constraints of time, such a pragmatic approach rather than a linguistic approach seems to be better and more effective option. This program should work well in courses developing sales

talk, technical presentations, conference presentations, as well as helping learners to speak English for everyday use.

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Footnote 1

1. Our students speak Mandarin, which has a distinct syllable-timed stress.